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SUBJECT: MISSION CANADA ASSESSES ELECTION 2008

Ref: A. Montreal 268 B. Toronto 284 C. Toronto 285
D. Ottawa 1258 E. Ottawa 1216 F. Vancouver 247

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: A Mission Canada-wide digital video conference (DVC) on September 29 resulted in a consensus assessment that the Conservatives will pick up additional seats in the October 14 Canadian federal elections, but not yet that the Conservatives will gain enough seats for a majority. Starting with the Maritimes, the net effect of volatility in the region could be a one-seat gain for the NDP, at the expense of the Liberals. The seat distribution in Nunavut and the area around Quebec City will likely stay static. The Conservatives look likely to gain one seat in the Montreal area, and the New Democratic Party (NDP) may gain one seat. The Conservatives seem likely to take 6-10 seats from the Liberals in Ontario - with an outside chance of gaining as many as 18-20 - as well as to gain one seat in Manitoba. The Conservatives may pick up one NDP seat in the Northwest Territories, with no changes in Alberta or Saskatchewan. In the west, the Conservatives may gain four seats in British Columbia. The Conservatives need 155 seats to form a majority government; much may ride on the performance of the five party leaders in the October 1 and 2 televised debates. The Liberals will likely remain the Official Opposition, despite the best efforts of the New Democratic Party (NDP) to position itself as the future natural opposition to the Conservatives. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) DCM (in Winnipeg) and PolMinCouns (in Ottawa) on September 29 co-chaired the monthly DVC among Mission Canada reporting officers, as well as WHA/CAN officers, with a focus this month on the October 14 Canadian federal election (reftels). PolMinCouns reiterated that the USG remains non-partisan in the ongoing campaign and that Canadian voters alone have the say in which party will win and form the next government. The U.S. nonetheless remains interested in the campaign dynamics and eventual outcome. He expressed thanks to all Mission elements for substantive reporting as well as contributions to the new Election Blog on the Embassy's Intranet site. He noted that conventional wisdom continues to point toward a Conservative victory, with some observers increasingly predicting a possible majority in the House of Commons. He added that there may still be many ups-and-downs in the campaign, with the possibility especially for missteps by any of the party leaders during the televised October 1 and 2 public debates.

HALIFAX - NDP MAY GAIN A SEAT IN ATLANTIC CANADA

¶3. (SBU) In ConGen Halifax's jurisdiction, the Conservatives currently have three seats in Newfoundland and Labrador, and the Liberals have four seats. Thanks in part to Premier Danny Williams' "Anything But Conservative" campaign, the Tories look set to lose all of their Newfoundland and Labrador seats - two to the Liberals and one to the NDP. The Conservatives may gain back a seat in Nova Scotia, taken from the Liberals. Green Party Leader Elizabeth May's attempt to unseat Tory Defense Minister Peter MacKay in the Central Nova riding will likely fail. The Liberals should hold on to all four of the seats in Prince Edward Island, and the Conservatives will likely take two seats from the Liberals in New Brunswick. The sum total of these shifts would be a one seat gain by the NDP in

Atlantic Canada, at the expense of the Liberals. According to ConGen Halifax, the Liberal Party in Atlantic Canada seems to be dragged down by the party's national leadership and by the unpopular Green Shift plan, and the NDP may be poised to capitalize on the Liberal's weakness. Other hot button issues in the region include broad economic concerns and the Canada's military presence in Afghanistan, manned heavily by Atlantic Canadians.

QUEBEC CITY - LITTLE ROOM FOR CONSERVATIVE GAINS

¶4. (SBU) ConGen Quebec City sees little room for Conservative gains in its consular district, which includes much of Quebec province, as well as the Arctic territory of Nunavut. Specifically, the Conservatives' recent plan to increase sentences for youthful offenders has not played well in Quebec, nor have PM Harper's comments on cuts to the arts. New, more rigorous national voter identification requirements might also depress voter turnout in Nunavut, where relatively fewer people have photo identification. In addition to the federal election, Nunavut is in the midst of a territorial election, confusing some voters. Quebec City predicts that the Liberals will hold their seat in Nunavut.

MONTREAL - CONSERVATIVE CONFIDENCE MISPLACED?

¶5. (SBU) In Montreal, local Conservative contacts are confident that the party will win additional seats in the election. However, urban Montreal has almost no Liberal seats identified as possible Tory upsets. Only one Liberal riding - Lac St. Louis - seems ripe for Conservative plucking. The Liberals are not campaigning hard in E the Montreal area, and the Bloc Quebecois and Conservatives look set to retain the seats they already have. In rural Quebec, however, the Conservatives might benefit from Bloc weakness and Liberal disorganization (ref A). While Quebecers know that the federal budget surplus disappeared under Harper, they also believe that Dion would be bad for the economy and are wary of possible new taxes.

TORONTO - POTENTIAL FOR CONSERVATIVE GAINS

¶6. (SBU) ConGen Toronto's contacts across the political spectrum predict Conservative gains in Ontario. Estimates of Conservative pickups range anywhere from six to 20 seats. Despite an overall atmosphere of Tory confidence, it is not clear from where the gains would come. The Conservatives are unlikely to break through in Toronto itself, and other than a few ridings, the vote-rich suburbs of Toronto are not clearly trending Tory. A weak national Liberal campaign depresses Liberal turnout, however, might allow the Tories to move ahead in the seat count. (For a more detailed analysis of some Ontario key and bellwether ridings, see ref B and ref C.) The economy is a major issue in Ontario, especially in southwestern Ontario, hit hard by job losses in the automobile industry.

WINNIPEG - ECONOMY FOCUS OF LOW-INTENSITY CAMPAIGN

¶7. (SBU) The American Presence Post in Winnipeg has detected little local enthusiasm for the Canadian federal election, as many voters are more focused on the U.S. election. Manitobans are taking the current economic uncertainty in stride, confident that the resource-rich province will weather any downturn. The Conservatives might pick up one seat in Manitoba. Crime and law and order remain key issues.

CALGARY - THE WEST STAYS CONSERVATIVE

¶8. (SBU) ConGen Calgary's consular district includes the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, as well as the Northwest Territories. The Conservative Party currently holds 13 of 14 seats in Saskatchewan and all 28 seats in Alberta. ConGen Calgary does not

see that changing, but predicts that the Conservatives might successfully challenge the NDP for the sole seat in the Northwest Territories.

VANCOUVER - GREEN SHIFT HELPS CONSERVATIVES?

¶9. (SBU) Conservatives currently hold half of the 36 ridings in British Columbia, and ConGen Vancouver predicts that the Tories might gain another four seats. The Tories will benefit from the Liberals' collapse in the area; the Liberals' Green Shift plan is especially unpopular in British Columbia, which has its own already disliked provincial carbon tax. In addition, the Conservatives will have an edge on economic and crime issues. The NDP looks poised to capitalize on the Liberals' misfortunes, and may add a few seats in B.C. Blair Wilson, the disgraced former Liberal who joined the Green Party in August, giving the Greens their first seat in Parliament, will likely lose his seat. (For a more detailed analysis of the election in B.C., see ref F).

OPPOSITION

¶10. (SBU) None of the reporting officers expressed any expectation that the NDP could do well enough to overtake the Liberals as the Official Opposition, despite the Liberals' organizational, leadership, and financial woes and the high profile campaigning of NDP leader Jack Layton. The NDP looks poised, however, to increase its representation somewhat, while the Greens will enjoy a jump in their popular vote, but once again remain poorly positioned to win seats.

NAY